

France: Transport workers mobilise against privatisation

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Demonstrators setting off from the Place de la Bastille

Tens of thousands of workers from 15 European countries demonstrated in Paris last Thursday against the privatisation of the railways. The protest, called by the European Transport Federation (ETF), was aimed at exerting pressure on the current rotating European Union president, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, to reverse course on the privatization measures.

The British Rail Maritime and Transport union sponsored a Eurostar train from London to carry workers to the demonstration. The flags and banners of delegations from Germany (the TFB union), Belgium and Portugal were also in evidence. Also participating were the ORSA, CUB and SdL unions from Italy, the *Comité officine* from Switzerland, the LAB from the Basque Country, and the SFF and CGT unions from Spain.

The overwhelming majority of the 10,000 to 20,000 marchers were in delegations from France organised by the CGT, whose flags and banners dominated the protest. There were smaller delegations from SUD and other French rail unions. The large numbers marching demonstrated the growing anxiety among workers over the scope of the attacks being mounted against their livelihoods.

The French train drivers unions have called an indefinite strike next week, in opposition to the plans of SNCF, the national public railway company, to deregulate work schedules and conditions for drivers in the freight division. The strike call followed the SNCF's

refusal to come to an agreement with the unions at a November 12 negotiating session, despite the strongly supported and effective strike of train drivers on November 6.

The FGAAC (General Federation of Train Drivers, an exclusively drivers' union representing just under 30 percent of drivers) in alliance with the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party, representing a small minority) have postponed their strike, which had been called for 8 p.m. Tuesday, until Friday.

The joint union committee (*Intersyndicale*) of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party, PCF), SUD (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy) and the CFE-CGC (a small administrative workers' union), representing over 60 percent of drivers, are beginning their indefinite strike from the evening of Sunday, November 23.

Air France pilots have been on a four-day strike since last Friday against a plan to push their retirement age from 60 to 65. On Thursday, teachers and students—at the call of virtually all staff and student unions, ranging from infant schools to the universities—will be on strike against the slashing of jobs and educational funding. On Saturday, postal workers will be demonstrating throughout France against privatisation and closures.

The conservative French daily *Le Figaro*, reporting November 13 on the strike movement on the French railways, said, "Despite this 'warning strike' [on November 6] the SNCF seems to have decided to override the unions. It is true that this change seems indispensable for freight to remain competitive against the private operators. The division is expected to lose over 300 million euros this year."

Le Figaro uncovered a report published on Thursday indicating that "The regions [French local government areas] and the SNCF's competitors are ready. December 3, 2009, regional express (TER) services, at present the preserve of the SNCF, will be opened up to competition.... Today all the regional councils are tied to the SNCF by contracts, which when they expire, may not be extended... All the regions will have to open up their markets by 2019 to be in conformity with the European directive on the subject.... Passengers will then be travelling on TER trains run by

Transdev..., Deutsche Bahn or Veolia.”

Transdev is a company launched by the French state sovereign fund, the *Caisse des depots*, in 1990. It acts as a private company, competing for business all over the world. This is the same for the RATP, the Paris urban transport company. Both are rivals of the SNCF. Veolia, founded in 1853 as a company supplying water to the town of Lyon, is now a world conglomerate operating in water supply, the environment, energy and transport. It was the first private company to operate trains on the French rail network.

François-Xavier Perin, the director general of Transdev, told *Le Figaro*, “Regional transport has been opened up to the market for five years in Germany. That has led to a lowering of operating costs by 20 percent and brand new stock for the passengers. The French regions are awaiting the same effects—great savings for them and the taxpayer.” The SNCF’s future competitors “are readying their weapons abroad before attacking the French market. Transdev and the RATP have thus created a new co-enterprise, EurailCo, which is opening a line in December between Cologne, Coblenz and Mayence in Germany.... Veolia is running 6,000 kilometres of lines across the Rhine.”

EU and French legislation is designed to break up national public enterprises into different sectors, which can then be turned into private companies, where wage levels, benefits and rights won in decades of struggle can be discarded. The disastrous effects on safety caused by the atomisation of the service has already been tragically demonstrated by deadly accidents in Britain, where separate privatised companies have been responsible for track maintenance and the operation of trains.

In 1996, the European Union Commission laid down the fundamental principle upon which rail transport should be organised: “The railways must be run on a commercial basis.” In 2001, the commission adopted a “railway package” in three stages: the separation of the management of infrastructures and the provision of services (this is already the case in France, where the state-owned RFF—French Rail Network—hires out its tracks to both the SNCF and private operators), the opening up in 2007 of the freight market throughout the EU and the opening up of the passenger sector in 2010. The watch words are: “Flexibility, multi-competence and mobility.”

In Germany, with the complicity of the main rail unions, the national rail service has been fractured into 346 companies, of which some 30 refuse to pay nationally agreed wages, according to the Transnet union. A spokesman for the German train drivers union, the GDL, told the press, “The DB [Deutsche Bahn—Germany’s largest railway company] has its own temping agency and breaks the national industry agreements. So, a temp train driver gets 22,000 euros a year, as against 31,500 euros for a DB worker.”

A leaflet handed out by the British RMT at the demonstration explained how state-owned companies such as the SNCF are already heavily involved in private enterprise: “Europe’s biggest state-owned rail companies in France and Germany are locked in a struggle across Europe. For instance, Germany’s Deutsche Bahn bought up the UK’s biggest rail freight operator EWS, and the French rail giant SNCF has just taken a 20 percent stake in NTV,

Europe’s first private high-speed train operator, which plans to operate between Rome and Milan.”

The trade unions offer no perspective for victory in the struggle now facing French and European railworkers. The ETF’s strategy of putting pressure on President Sarkozy—in order to persuade him to organise a retreat by the EU from its pro-market, capitalist agenda—is designed to prevent workers from developing an independent political perspective to defend their interests.

As they go into battle with the government and the European Union, French railway workers should be mindful of the lessons of their struggles over the last 12 years and the treacherous role played by the trade unions. The 1995 strike against the Juppé Plan (Alain Juppé, Gaullist prime minister 1995-1997) was suffocated by the unions, especially by the CGT. The most disputed part of the Juppé plan was withdrawn, but all his other measures remained in place and formed the basis of the attacks on government workers’ pensions in 2003.

In the 2007 fight for the defence of transport, gas and electricity workers’ special pension schemes, the CGT and other unions, joined by SUD-rail at the round-table discussions at the end of 2007, broke up the strike movement and finally negotiated the dismantling of their pension schemes. The CGT and the CFDT also collaborated with the government and the employers this year to deregulate the workweek with the “Common Position.”

A leaflet distributed on Thursday’s demonstration by the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League), soon to become the NPA (*Nouveau parti anti-capitaliste*, New Anti-capitalist Party) makes no attempt to remind workers of these experiences. It limits itself to a national perspective, calling not for the development of a united movement of the European working class, but urging only that “The demonstration must serve to give confidence for the preparation of a counteroffensive against this [the French] government.”

What is required is a programme of united political struggle by the European working class, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and “left” parties, to replace the capitalist European Union with the reorganization of the European economy on a socialist basis.



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